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CDC, EPA officials to return to Charleston

by [Dave Boucher](#)

Daily Mail Capitol Bureau Chief

CHARLESTON, W.Va. - A team from two federal agencies is returning to Charleston at the request of Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin to discuss future actions concerning the recent Elk River chemical spill.

Officials with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Environmental Protection Agency are set to meet with state officials today, said Bernadette Burden, CDC spokeswoman.

An "Epi-team" - staff with the CDC's Epidemiological Intelligence Service - arrived in Charleston Jan. 16, a week after state officials discovered thousands of gallons of coal-cleaning chemicals leaking from a storage tank along the Elk River.

The agency issued its advisory warning pregnant women against drinking water with any level of crude MCHM the night before.

The Epi-team came to Charleston specifically to help review health data of those who reported symptoms they believed to be connected to the leak, Burden said. The team returned to Atlanta Friday, and state officials will receive a report when it's finished, she said.

Different officials from the CDC are heading back to Charleston.

Burden said the three-person team is led by Dr. Tanja Popovic, acting director for the National Center for Environmental Health/Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

She'll be joined by Dr. Ed Murray, acting director of the Toxicology and Human Health Sciences

division under Popovic. The director of CDC public affairs will join them.

Apart from speaking with state officials, it's not clear what they'll be doing. Burden said they'll have a better understanding of what help is needed, and whether other officials need to come to the state, after today's meeting.

She wasn't sure which state officials would be at the meeting, and she didn't mention the names of the EPA team members.

Tomblin spokeswoman Amy Shuler Goodwin didn't respond to several requests for comment.

The governor's official Twitter account says Tomblin, along with a state and federal team, will provide a "detailed update" today. The update will cover "what we've accomplished, where we are, & actions moving forward," according to the tweet.

The CDC's delayed warning, as well as how it arrived at the 1-part-per-million "safe" level of crude MCHM in the water, have led to criticism from the public and local officials.

Dr. Vikas Kapil, a CDC official who works in Popovic's division, said last month the CDC issued the advisory for pregnant women out of "an abundance of caution" and because the situation was evolving and changing.

In a subsequent interview with the Charleston Gazette, he said the CDC should have made the advisory sooner.

Decisions by the CDC and the spill in general were the focus of a hearing before a U.S. Senate subcommittee Tuesday.

Secretary Randy Huffman, head of the state Department of Environmental Protection, outlined some of the actions his department has taken since the spill.

Before the spill, the DEP had no idea how many aboveground storage tanks like the faulty one found at Freedom Industries' Elk River location existed in the state. An inventory is still in its early stages, but Huffman told the committee it appears there are at least 600 facilities with at least 3,500 tanks.

That includes 100 facilities and at least 1,000 aboveground storage tanks that may sit near a public drinking water source.

"Many of these tanks contain petroleum or other materials that may be regulated under different programs, in which case they would not pose the risk that the Freedom Industries site and others like it pose, but these numbers clearly raise concerns that this incident could be repeated in other areas of the state," Huffman said in his prepared remarks.

The DEP continues to monitor Freedom's facilities at both Elk River and Poca Blending - the site where Freedom took chemicals involved in the spill.

The agency announced Tuesday afternoon that Freedom at some point planned to move 3,500 gallons of crude MCHM from Poca Blending to "a coal facility in Pennsylvania."

These chemicals are from the stash already housed at the site before the leak, though. Anywhere from 10,000 to 99,999 pounds of crude MCHM sat at the site, according to the most recent Tier II report filed by the company.

After the chemicals were moved from the Elk River site to the Poca Blending site, the DEP discovered the new site lacked any efficient emergency barriers to contain a spill.

"When we inspected the site (Poca Blending), our focus was not on the entire facility but rather on the area where materials from the spill site were being stored," DEP spokesman Tom Aluisse said.

Freedom wasn't ordered to move the chemicals originally stored at the Poca Blending site. Moving them could lead to a noticeable increase in the chemical's telltale black licorice odor, though, so Aluisse said they wanted to let people know what was going on.

"Freedom continues to be in violation of our order that mandated they have adequate secondary containment for the materials transferred from the spill site to Poca Blending," he added.

More shipments are planned in the near future, according to the DEP news release.